

MEDICATIONS FOR OPIOID ADDICTION

A Guide for Families

Pain medications can be helpful when taken as prescribed, but they can also be addictive. Opioid addiction, also known as **opioid use disorder (OUD)**, affects families all around us. But there are **medications that can help**, and families can play a key role in encouraging a loved one to consider them.

Understanding Opioid Addiction

Opioids include prescription pain pills like OxyContin, Percocet, and Vicodin, as well as heroin and fentanyl. With OUD, people can get stuck in a cycle of use because their brain wants opioids all the time despite the consequences. Opioid use can result in overdose, the spread of diseases like hepatitis C or HIV/AIDS, infections, and death.

It's not easy to stop using opioids without help. And if a person stops, they will go into withdrawal — it's like having a raging storm inside the brain and body causing cravings, nausea, cramping, and aching all over.

The Benefits of Medications

Medications for opioid addiction calm that storm — that part of the brain that keeps asking for opioids. They allow someone with OUD to take back control of their lives by reducing cravings and withdrawal symptoms. More importantly, they are key in terms of reducing overdoses and saving lives. OUD is a chronic health condition that often requires long-term management, just like diabetes or high blood pressure. People often find that receiving medication for opioid addiction is a turning point in their recovery.

Types of Medications

Three main medications can help with OUD:

- 1. Methadone:** This medication helps by calming down the brain to lessen withdrawal symptoms and cravings without making a person feel high. It's given at opioid treatment programs, which are special clinics that provide patients with the medication daily. Other services like therapy or the screening and treatment of other health problems may be offered.
- 2. Buprenorphine:** Like methadone, this medication can reduce withdrawal symptoms and ease cravings. A doctor can prescribe this medication in the privacy of their office. It comes in a pill or film taken by mouth daily, as well as weekly or monthly injections.
- 3. Naltrexone:** This medication, which is given as a monthly injection, blocks opioids from working in the brain. A health care provider can prescribe and give this medication in their office.

Think of these medications as tools in a toolbox for fighting OUD. They help stop cravings and withdrawal symptoms and allow the brain to heal, making it easier for a loved one to focus on getting better. Additionally, health care providers can recommend a comprehensive treatment plan to address other physical and mental health problems.

Safety First

If your loved one is using opioids, be sure to have [naloxone](#) on hand and know how to use it to reverse an overdose. There may be other ways that your loved one can reduce the risks linked to their substance use. Learn more about this in the [Harm Reduction Resource Center](#).

Where to Find Help

If your loved one needs these medications, use [Safe Locator](#) to find services. Primary care doctors or [addiction psychiatrists](#) may be able to provide services or a referral. If your loved one lives in a rural area where physically getting to a provider can be challenging, try telehealth providers. They may be able to prescribe buprenorphine without a face-to-face visit.

Sometimes people experience challenges getting these medications. Insurance is often required to cover some of these medications just as they would other medications. This [resource](#) may be helpful if you have insurance questions. Those who are uninsured may qualify for free or low-cost treatment at state-funded clinics. Payment assistance may be available for naltrexone and buprenorphine.

If you need support encouraging your loved one to get help, connect with Partnership to End Addiction's free and confidential [helpline](#) at [drugfree.org](#). This article on [suggesting treatment](#) may also be helpful. Remember, you can be a powerful influence on your loved one.

When someone you care about is struggling with opioid use disorder, it's **important to know that there's hope**. These medications, in addition to family support, offer better outcomes. In fact, Nora Volkow, Director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse, has said that by making these medications universally available nationwide, we would have **at least 50% fewer people dying from opioid overdose**. Families can make a difference by encouraging use of these options, getting the right help, and providing hope for their loved ones.